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All Creoles Now? *Béké* identity and the *Eloge de la créolité*

Maeve McCusker

Writing in 1997, Raphaël Confiant, one of the three signatories of the *Eloge de la créolité*, claimed that the manifesto's key objective had been to "bring in the béké,"¹ that is, the White Creole, the direct descendant of the European plantation owners in the Antilles. In a fairly rancorous account of the *Eloge*'s genesis and afterlife, Confiant attributed the "failure" of the project not to any inherent ideological flaw, but rather to "the blindness and the hypocrisy and the racism of those to whom we reached out, that is, the Békés."² Even allowing for the informality of Confiant's remarks, expressed in an email, and for the Martinican novelist's notorious irascibility, readers might justifiably be surprised to see *békés* placed at the very heart of a movement which appears in many ways to overlook if not to marginalize them. *Békés* are barely named in the manifesto, nor in the many interviews given by the signatories at the time of its publication. Their peripheral status can be seen for example in the literary history sketched in the opening pages of the *Eloge*, which effectively begins with Negritude, and thereby occludes white Creole writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Of only three explicit references to the *béké* in the *Eloge*, two are factual -- one a footnote reclaiming the original (inclusive) meaning of the word Creole, and divesting it of its exclusive reference to white Creoles,³ a second stating that the French language had come to the islands from the "classe blanche créole."⁴ The third, less neutral, reference to the *béké* is a somewhat defensive allusion to Saint-John Perse. Although the Nobel Prize-winning poet is

¹ The etymology of the term *Béké* remains contested; some trace its origins to the term "Blanc créole," others to an Ibo word meaning both "white" and "foreigner", others still to a command 'Bêchez', "dig". Although it has been claimed that it is used only in Martinique, the term is current in Guadeloupe as well.

² Hanétha Vété-Congolo, "Créolisation, créolité, Martinique, and the Dangerous Intellectual Deception of 'Tous Créoles!'" *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 8 (2014): 781.

³ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, trans. M.M. Taleb-Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 61; 121. Further references will give page numbers for the French, then the English translation, respectively.

⁴ "The Creole white class," *Eloge*, 46; 107

consecrated “l’un des fils les plus prestigieux de la Guadeloupe,” the subsequent caveat “et cela *malgré son appartenance* à l’ethnoclasse béké” suggests the uneasy accommodation of this son of a plantation owner in the Antillean literary canon,⁵ as well as an anxiety regarding the parameters of the ostensibly all-encompassing *créolité* project.

This uneasiness is of course symptomatic of a more general malaise with regard to the “*béké* question,” reflecting the fact that the caste--a tiny but dominant minority in the French Caribbean⁶--is not only inextricably bound to the brutality of the slave past, but has also, since the origins of the plantation system, crafted a self-image founded on separation from, and superiority to, “black” Antilleans.⁷ Arriving in the Caribbean at roughly the same time as the slaves over whom they would rule, *békés* historically constituted between 10 and 15% of the Martinican population,⁸ and today account for approximately 1% of the Martinican population. (The situation is markedly different in Guadeloupe which was occupied by the English during the French Revolution. White Creoles were guillotined en masse during the Terror and the hold of white landowners was definitively curtailed in that island; many of the *békés* currently resident in Guadeloupe have migrated from Martinique). The historic *béké* aspiration to “préserver la race” [preserve their race] distilled a desire to ensure economic supremacy through enforcing racial uniformity; in other words by preventing inter-breeding with non-whites--or, more accurately, by refusing to recognize children born through intercourse with Black slaves and their descendants--the caste ensured the perpetuation of white dominance. The perception remains that whenever there is a threat to the caste from the outside, its members close ranks in the interests of self-preservation and inter-*béké* solidarity.

⁵ “one of the most prestigious sons of Guadeloupe, *in spite of his belonging* to the Béké ethnoclass,” *Eloge de la Créolité*, 29; 90, emphasis mine.

⁶ Although exact figures are hard to come by, it is estimated that 50% of agricultural land and 90% of the agri-food industry is owned by the caste. See *Les Derniers Maîtres de la Martinique*, dir. Romain Bolzinger, Canal Plus, shown in France, Guadeloupe and Martinique 30 Jan 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDHItB-uml>.

⁷ Here and throughout, scare quotes signal an awareness of the spurious nature of these “colorist” positions.

⁸ Figures derived from Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty. The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), vii.

The French Antilles remain today a society obsessed with gradations of skin colour, and with the social hierarchies which largely reflect, or are determined by, racial identity. The “cost of living” strikes of 2009, reported in the US and elsewhere as race riots, and the incendiary effects of the documentary of the same year, *Les Derniers Maîtres de la Martinique* [The Last Masters of Martinique], attest to the fact that whiteness commands much more than cultural or imaginary capital in the French Antilles. All of this is complicated by the anomalous political position of the Antilles today: ex-slave colonies, Guadeloupe and Martinique have been since 1946 overseas departments of France. Yarimar Bonilla argues that since departmentalization, white Creoles have proven to be “surprisingly resilient,” having been able to make the shift “from a production-based plantation model to a consumption-driven import, tourist and service dominated economy.” As a result, she argues, *békés* “continue to be synonymous with the ‘owning class.’”⁹

Béké identity, then, was forged and sustained in striking contrast to the processes of contact, cross-fertilization and contamination celebrated in the *Eloge*. While slavery endured, the planter’s power was discursive as well as economic; as Régis Antoine notes, “il n’y aura longtemps en ces territoires qu’une parole reconnue -- la voix coloniale.”¹⁰ And yet, although economic power remains largely vested in “white” hands, David Macey is correct in his observation that today, “the voice of the *béké* is rarely heard.”¹¹ Despite the extraordinary economic privilege enjoyed by the caste, the relatively rare forays into the public sphere by

⁹ Yarimar Bonilla, “Guadeloupe is Ours. The Prefigurative Politics of the Mass Strike in the French Antilles,” *Interventions* 12, no.1 (2010): 131.

¹⁰ “For a long time, only the colonial voice was to be heard.” Régis Antoine, *La Littérature franco-antillaise. Haïti, Guadeloupe et Martinique* (Paris: Karthala, 1992), 13.

¹¹ David Macey, “‘I am my own foundation’. Frantz Fanon as a source of continued political embarrassment,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27, no. 7-8 (2010): 45. Saint-John Perse--often assumed to be French--is unique among *béké* writers in terms of literary respectability. Marie-Reine de Jaham, the caste’s only recognized contemporary author, left the Antilles for the US in her twenties, lived for many years in Nice, and is now based in Burgundy.

individual *békés* tend to express a sense of marginalization, victimization or even persecution.¹²

Taking as a springboard the *Eloge*'s uneasy accommodation of Perse, and Macey's observation on the relative inaudibility of the *béké* today, this article interrogates the extent to which *créolité* has resonated with "white" Creoles. I discuss a number of key cultural and political moments, roughly a decade apart, in which white Creoles *have* raised their voices, or have been interpellated by the "black" population: 1989, the year of publication of the *Eloge de la créolité*, and also of Marie-Reine de Jaham's emblematic first novel *La Grande Béké*;¹³ 1998, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of slavery, when this novel was adapted for television, and when *béké* businessman Roger de Jaham, a relative by marriage of Marie-Reine, would initiate a series of significant and highly controversial political interventions;¹⁴ and 2009, when "cost of living" strikes would heighten anti-*béké* sentiment across the two islands. In analysing these various moments and their repercussions, my intention is not to establish any direct relationship, whether antagonistic or sympathetic, between the *Eloge de la créolité* and the identitarian discourses of white Creoles; indeed Jaham's novel, published three months before the *Eloge*, could be considered a pre-*créolité* work, even if the ideas expressed in the manifesto were in circulation a year before (or indeed earlier still, if one accepts the view that the manifesto is in many respects derivative of Glissant).¹⁵ Rather, through the prism of the manifesto, I sketch a number of tropes, images and discursive positions which, whether directly influenced by *créolité*, or articulated in

¹² See, for example, Tony Delsham's interview with *béké* Patrice Fabre, "Aujourd'hui nous nous sentons persécutés," [Today we feel we are persecuted] *Antilla*, 1275, 29 November 2007, 12-18. Also typical of this strain of discourse is Roger de Jaham's notorious claim in 2011 that his *béké* ancestor had suffered more than slaves under slavery, discussed below.

¹³ Marie-Reine de Jaham, *La Grande Béké* [The Great Béké] (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), hereafter *GB*. Although the term is sometimes feminized (*bekée*), the novel's title is in the neutral case.

¹⁴ Marie-Reine de Jaham (née Dulieu) is the wife of Philippe de Jaham, Roger's second cousin. See Paul Michaux's genealogy of *béké* families:

<http://gw.geneanet.org/pmchx?lang=fr;pz=paul+marie+joseph;nz=michaux;ocz=0;em=R;ei=3911;et=A;p=philippe;n=de+jaham> (accessed 15 September 2015).

¹⁵ The manifesto is the published version of a speech given at the Seine Saint-Denis festival in May 1988.

opposition (or more frequently, in parallel) to it, illuminate the (lack of) development in *béké* identity politics over the last twenty-five years.

Marie-Reine de Jaham is described by Chris Bongie as “the Jackie Collins of Franco-Caribbean historical fiction,”¹⁶ and her first novel, *La Grande Béké*, has been compared to *Gone With the Wind* and to *Fort Boyard*, as well as to US soap operas *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. The novel was a popular success; after its initial publication in Laffont’s “Bestseller” series, it quickly went through five re-editions, and garnered significant interest in the Antilles and in metropolitan France.¹⁷ The novel’s title and first-person perspective encouraged speculation about its autobiographical content, and for a short time granted Jaham a certain status as *porte parole* for her community.¹⁸ In interviews, the author stressed the commonalities between the life of the heroine, Fleur de Mase de la Joucquerie, and that of her ancestors, notably her maternal grandfather. Fleur, like Jaham’s grandfather, dedicates her life to rebuilding the family plantation destroyed by the Saint-Pierre volcano of 1902. But having discovered in old age that her grasping and untrustworthy children wish to wrest control of the plantation from her, Fleur bequeaths it to her Parisian grandson, Mickey (son of Raoul, Fleur’s son by her long-deceased American lover Duke), a seventeen year old whom

¹⁶ Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies. The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 292

¹⁷ The prime time literary TV programme *Ex Libris*, presented by Patrick Poivre d’Avor, dispatched a reporter to Martinique to interview Jaham about the novel (broadcast 24 May 1989, TF1). *Antilla* devoted its front cover to the novel on its release, with the headline “Livre scandale. Quand une békée juge les békés” [Scandalous Book. When a Béké judges her fellow békés] and included two reviews by prominent critics. Raphaël Confiant criticizes Jaham’s literary style – which he claims bears only a passing resemblance to “ce qu’on appelle généralement la Littérature” [what we generally call literature] -- and her negrophobia. However her “plague on all your houses” approach (mulattoes and, especially, *békés*, are also treated with derision), as well as the insights afforded into the secretive world of the *béké* (for Confiant, Jaham is the first writer to have fully explored the role of the *da* or nanny in Antillean fiction), means that the novel is deemed “digne d’intérêt malgré tout” [worthy of interest despite everything]. For Pierre Pinalie-Dracius, the author remains unforgivably “fermée à la raison historique” [closed to historical reason] in seeming to absolve her caste for the ills of slavery. *Antilla* 329, 17-23 April 1989: 14-19.

¹⁸ See, for example, J.P. Péroncel-Hugoz, “La Martinique en mots d’auteurs” [Martinique in the words of its writers] *Le Monde*, 19 May 1990, 15-19. In this article Jaham’s photograph appears between that of Aimé Césaire and Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie, in a triptych clearly intended to personify white, black and *métisse* Martinicans. Jaham’s later novels attracted much less attention, both in the Antilles and in France.

she has never met. Mickey, predictably, takes time to adapt to his new environment, and eventually overcomes various confrontations with labourers, union representatives and family members. He also overcomes his grandmother's opposition to his romance with Camilla (also newly arrived -- the couple meet on the plane), granddaughter of a *béké*, Lorigny, Fleur's arch rival.¹⁹ By the novel's end Mickey is poised to assume control of the plantation and to marry Camilla, while the eponymous heroine, in an anachronistic and unbelievable denouement, enters a convent.

Like the US soap operas mentioned above, the novel's overarching thematic preoccupation is with blood, genes, legitimacy, inheritance and inter- and intra-clan warfare. And as its title suggests, Fleur, who declares at one stage "je suis la plantation,"²⁰ is shown to embody *béké* society generally. She suffers several heart attacks in the course of the novel, her fragility clearly to be read as a synecdoche of that of her caste. Also representative is the Mase de la Jouquerie clan, whose genetic predisposition to alcoholism and madness aligns them with those "hellish" families "dignes des Atrides et des Antilles";²¹ the House of Atreus, cursed by the Gods, is presented as a prototype and archetype of the *béké* family. Crucial to this general aura of fatalism is a pervading sense of genetic constriction. Fleur describes the *béké* family as a "huis clos,"²² and observes that "on retrouve toujours quelque part une lointaine souche commune chez tous les békés,"²³ while another character comments, "Ne sommes-nous pas tous des cousins à quelque degré?"²⁴ Fleur understands that this consanguinity is incompatible with healthy reproduction and generational longevity. She works to engineer the survival of her plantation and her caste (the two are repeatedly

¹⁹ The 1991 follow-up novel to *La Grande Béké*, *Le Maître Savane* [Master of the Savannah] (Paris: Pocket, 1993), set ten years later, suggests that this link to Lorigny is a ruse, and that Camilla is merely "*présentée* comme un parent de Lorigny" [*presented* as a relative of Lorigny] 47, my italics. This novel also sees Mickey engaged to his half-cousin Irina--who is murdered by a rival--before being reunited, once more, with Camilla.

²⁰ "I am the plantation," *GB*, 38.

²¹ "Worthy of the House of Atreus and of the Antilles," *GB*, 35.

²² "operating behind closed doors," *GB*, 38.

²³ "you always find a common ancestor somewhere in *béké* families," *GB*, 79.

²⁴ "Aren't we all cousins, to a greater or lesser extent?," *GB*, 294.

connected by the protagonist) through the principle of grafting, or transplanting, the “bastard” Mickey, whose otherness is registered in his incongruous forename, and that of his grandfather Duke, into the organism of the plantation. As Fleur proclaims, “Mickey c’est du neuf; un autre sang coule dans ses veines.”²⁵

In biological terms, the graft or transplant works on the principle of insertion, incorporation or contact from an outside organism or body, and compensates for a defect or lack in the host. In a *mise en abyme* of the familial project, Fleur, a keen gardener, eventually and after much effort manages to breed a black orchid. In a passage which I shall quote at length, she connects her botanical enterprise explicitly to her attempts to save her caste.

Méticuleusement je taille la pointe du greffon, en prenant soin de bien biseauter la section de la tige, puis je gratte l’écorce pour mettre à vif la chair de la plante. Ensuite, d’une incision nette, je fais une entaille profonde, presque horizontale, dans la liane choisie pour servir de mère. Avec satisfaction, je regarde perler le sang blanc de l’orchidée. Enfin, à l’aide d’une pince, je saisis le greffon et l’enfonce dans la blessure que je viens de faire. [...]. Regarde, j’ai pris cette plante dégénérée, incapable de produire une fleur, et je viens de faire une greffe. Une orchidée naîtra. Une orchidée noire. La plus belle, la plus rare de toutes [...]. Les békés sont devenus comme cette plante. Alors, là aussi, je suis en train de réaliser une greffe.²⁶

The reader might at first see in the black orchid an (albeit crude) reference to a non-white element in, or product of, the graft or transplant, given the extent to which colour positions in this deeply shadist society, and especially in *béké* writings, are expressed and reinforced through analogy, metaphor and association.²⁷ However, the familial *greffe* is here realized through the imposition of Fleur’s illegitimate, but resolutely “white,” Parisian grandson.

²⁵ “Mickey is something new; a different blood runs through his veins,” *GB*, 239.

²⁶ “I sharpen the end of the graft meticulously, taking care to cut cleanly into the stem, then I scrape the bark to expose the plant’s flesh. From a clean incision, I make a deep, almost horizontal nick in the creeper chosen to be the host. I watch the white blood of the orchid form with satisfaction. Finally, using a pair of pliers, I seize the graft and stick it into the wound I’ve just made. [...] Look, I’ve taken this degenerate plant, which couldn’t flower, and I’ve just performed a transplant. An orchid will grow from it. A black orchid, the most beautiful and the rarest of all. Békés have become like this plant. And for them too, I’m in the process of carrying out a graft.” *GB*, 212-13.

²⁷ See Maeve McCusker, “Introduction” to Louis de Maynard de Queilhe, *Outre-mer* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009 [1835]), vii-xxxix. In Jaham’s fiction, as in other Antillean writing, the “whiteness” of the *béké* is suggested in references to porcelain, white muslin, lace and pearls. A good example of this is the description of Fleur’s bedroom (*GB*, 16).

Mickey is of course only “new” or “other” in a very limited sense, being closely related to Fleur herself. Thus, the “sang blanc” of the flower could be seen to be the more resonant metaphor for the racial engineering at work in the text.

By the novel’s end, the Joucquerie dynasty has survived; what has not been contemplated on the narrative register, however, is an interracial union with local Martinicans. The “black” population, at the novel’s end as at its beginning, occupies universally subaltern positions (servants, labourers and tradesmen). The new blood injected by Mickey (North American from his father, French from his mother, but also of course *béké* from his grandmother) facilitates a steadfastly white on white combination, and one destined to be reinforced rather than diluted by marriage to Camilla, herself (apparently--see note 20) of *béké* origins. The passage emphasizes the contrived and manipulated nature of this transplant, the dominance of the first person pronoun underscoring Fleur’s control, as she describes her meticulousness, the clean lines of the horizontal incision, and the carefully chosen “mother” plant. If the novel appears at first blush to advocate principles valorized in the *Eloge* (transplant, transcultural exchange and the embrace of otherness) as necessary preconditions for the caste’s survival, the rejuvenation and cross-fertilization envisaged are of a controlled and highly engineered kind, far removed from the spontaneous and chaotic combinations privileged in the *Eloge*. Rather, as Fleur declares at one stage, “ici, c’est noir ou blanc, tout ou rien.”²⁸ The project to preserve the family line, and the plantation, has also been a project implicitly but quintessentially designed to reinforce racial binaries, and in so doing to “préserver la race.”

It could of course be argued that, as the ideas expressed in the *Eloge de la créolité* gained currency, the ever-evolving processes of creolization would see the *béké* caste increasingly mobilized by the “harmonisation consciente des diversités préservées”

²⁸ “Here it’s black and white, all or nothing,” *GB*, 29.

optimistically heralded in its last line of the *Eloge de la créolité*.²⁹ Having eschewed the term “Creole” in her first novels, Jaham herself would quickly become an energetic advocate of the signifier. In 1992 she launched a festival, “Patrimoine créole” [Creole Heritage] (to be superseded in 1997 by the “Festival Créole”), used the term in a novel title (*La Veranda créole* [The Creole Veranda], 2005), and included as a preface to her fifth novel a brief history of “Les Créoles,” celebrating the mixing and the fusion of Creole culture, as well as its arts and traditions.³⁰ She also founded a publishing imprint entitled “Patrimoine créole” [Creole Heritage]. However the only publications to appear in this series were two of Jaham’s own works which, when read alongside a later work dedicated to the *da*, the slave nanny, reveal a strong strain of exoticism.³¹ The four collaborations between *béké* photographer Jean-Luc de Laguarigue and novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, starting in 1998--photo-texts dedicated to key strands of Martinique’s heritage--are undoubtedly better examples of (generic) hybridity and (inter-caste) collaboration.³² In the same year, as Martinique and Guadeloupe commemorated the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery, a TV film of *La Grande Béké* (whose storyline included Jaham’s follow-up to her first novel, *Le Maître Savane*) was screened over two Saturday nights, in a primetime slot on France 3.³³ In addition to relocating the story from the 1960s to a contemporary setting, the film includes a number of significant departures from the novel, most notably in terms of inter-racial relationships. The most significant of these is the recasting of the novel’s central

²⁹ “the conscious harmonization of preserved diversities,” *Eloge*, 54; 114.

³⁰ Marie-Reine de Jaham, *Le Sang du volcan* [The Blood of the Volcano] (Paris: Pocket, 1997), pp. 15-16.

³¹ *Les Rituels du rhum et la cuisine créole* [Rituals of Rum and Creole Cooking] (Paris: Montorgueil, 1992); *Les Desserts créoles et leur complice le sucre de canne* [Creole Deserts and their Accomplice, Cane Sugar] (Paris: Montorgueil, 1993); *La Cuisine créole de Da Doudou: 100 recettes traditionnelles (et tout ce qu’il faut savoir sur le rhum)* [Nanny Doudou’s Creole Cooking: 100 traditional recipes (and all you need to know about rum)] (Nice: Fasal, 1993).

³² *Elmire des sept bonheurs. Confidences d’un vieux travailleur de la distillerie Saint-Etienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); *Tracées de mélancolies* (Le Gros Morne [Martinique]: Traces, 1999); *Cases en pays mêlé* (Paris: Hazan, 2000). Another book, with text and photographs by Laguarigue, *Bagne AP* (Ivry-sur-Seine [France], Gros Morne [Martinique]: Traces, 2011), reprints an extract from Chamoiseau’s essay *Guyane, Traces-mémoires de la bague*.

³³ *La Grande Béké*, dir. Alain Maline, broadcast 14 and 21 March 1998, France 3. It starred Line Renaud and Antony Delon, son of Alain.

love story as a cross-racial affair. Camilla Delesque has been renamed Camilla Fanon--the iconic surname clearly aligning the character with radical anti-colonial and anti-racist politics. This (“black”) Camilla, a high profile journalist, is the daughter of a murdered trade union leader,³⁴ a politicized and independent woman from whom Fleur’s grandson (renamed Marc, and presented, initially at least, as a carefree playboy) receives an education on the ills of slavery and the inequalities that continue to blight the island. As in the novel, Fleur contrives to separate the couple, but in the film her impetus is explicitly framed as an attempt to prevent racial mixing, rather than to prevent a marriage with the grand-daughter of an enemy *béké*. And predictably enough, the film’s final scene shows the family reunited, a baby born to the young couple, and the (newly enlightened) matriarch no longer in the convent, but integrated into this happily creolized brave new world.

The changes made in the adaptation of *La Grande Béké* arguably suggest the unacceptability of Marie-Reine de Jaham’s novel--with its repudiation of creolization and blindness to the continuing struggles of the ex-slave population--for both a mainstream French and for an Antillean audience in 1998. The year was, after all, a high point in the memorialization of slavery. For the author, the adaptation was a disappointment; while applauding the performance of Line Renaud, who played Fleur, Jaham regrets that the film was neither a “vecteur de valorisation de la culture créole ni de sa compréhension,”³⁵ although she here would seem to use “creole” in its *exclusive* (“white”) sense. The critical year of 1998 would also see the publication of the short letter “Nous nous souvenons,” [We

³⁴ There are strong resonances with the biography of the celebrity Martinican journalist Audrey Pulvar, whose prematurely deceased father Marc Pulvar (1936-2008) was a prominent syndicalist and founder of the MIM (Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais). Pulvar was anchor for the evening news on Antilles Télévision from 1995, so already well known by the time the film was shot in 1998.

³⁵ “neither a vector for the validation, nor for a better understanding, of Creole culture.” See <http://ordesiles.com/litterature/litterature/marie-reine-de-jaham-2/interview-de-mo-kat-pawol-marie-reine-de-jaham/> (accessed 15 September 2015). The interview with Jaham is anonymous and undated, although it refers to 2012.

remember]³⁶ instigated by the *béké* Roger de Jaham and signed by over 400 of his *béké* colleagues. The text recognized slavery as a crime against humanity several years before the Loi Taubira enshrined this in law--though as Chris Bongie notes the question of reparations was rejected out of hand by Jaham in interviews.³⁷ The initiative paved the way for Jaham's speaking at the 22 May commemorations of the end of slavery in 2006 alongside Serge Letchimy, successor to Césaire as mayor of Fort-de-France, and culminated in his establishment of the organization Tous creoles! [All Creoles!], launched in 2007. Tous Créoles! positions itself explicitly and unapologetically in the lineage of the *Eloge de la créolité*. Its motto ("faire de nos différences une œuvre collective"),³⁸ language (the terms "créole" and "créolité" are sprinkled liberally as markers of positive cross-cultural interaction throughout the various documents and postings on the association's website), and overarching political agenda (defending human rights, and combatting racism, xenophobia, racism and all forms of discrimination) resonate with the *Eloge*.³⁹ The website features a document entitled "Petit éloge de notre créolité," and in the minutes of the first AGM, also available on the site, the *Eloge* is quoted. Jaham himself frequently cites Chamoiseau and Glissant, declaring in a recent interview that, "Nous avons fait nôtre l'annonce de Chamoiseau, Confiant et Bernabé qui disaient 'Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Chinois, nous nous déclarons Créoles.'"⁴⁰

These initiatives adopt the *Eloge*'s celebratory rhetoric around multiplicity and syncretism, and have provided a space for *békés* to recognize the ills of slavery. But with

³⁶ *Antilla* 768, 26 June 1998, 8. Accessible on the Tous Créoles! site: <http://www.touscreoles.fr/?s=nous+nous+souvenons> (accessed 15 September 2015).

³⁷ Bongie, *Friends and Enemies*, 212.

³⁸ "to create out of our differences a collective work."

³⁹ The association boasts a slick and regularly updated website, <http://www.touscreoles.fr/>, which celebrates the fact that it was founded by "Noirs, Mulâtres, Indiens, Chinois, Békés, Syro-libanais, mais aussi des Métropolitains et des Africains ayant adopté depuis longtemps notre créolité comme démarche de vie et de pensée."

⁴⁰ "We made our own Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé's announcement that 'Neither Europeans, Africans not Chinese, we declare ourselves Creoles'. See "Plumes d'ici. Le Mag littéraire," 14 January 2015, presented by Rodolf Etienne: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwQ38WXcA8w> (accessed 15 September 2015).

notable exceptions among the non-*béké* population--Tony Delsham, although critical of the *Eloge*,⁴¹ is a controversial member of Tous Créoles!,⁴² while Jean Bernabé initially welcomed the initiative, contributed to the site, and was lauded in some of the essays appearing there⁴³--the response has been suspicious if not hostile. The disproportionately heavy involvement of *békés* in the establishment and running of Tous Créoles! has been a source of ongoing criticism,⁴⁴ as has the fact that Jaham has carved out a position as (co)president for life.⁴⁵ Confiant has been the movement's fiercest critic, condemning the belated and cynical appropriation, in 2007, of the 1989 text. He claims that in drafting the *Eloge* he, Chamoiseau and others had organized, over the course of a year, a series of meetings with Jaham and other *békés*, but that the supremacist ideology of the latter had caused the initiative to flounder. The discursive proximity between the two movements leads Confiant to talk of conceptual theft. He likens Jaham's manoeuvre to "un adversaire qui s'empare de vos outils idéologiques," and concludes that the movement is a "perversion de la créolité. Exactement comme le duvaliérisme était une perversion de la Négritude or comme le régime de Pol Pot au Cambodge est une perversion du marxisme."⁴⁶ Tous Créoles!, he argues, pays lip service

⁴¹ In a statement which sits (apparently) uneasily with his membership of Jaham's organization, Delsham rejects the very notion of creolization in the Antilles, arguing that the *béké* has signally failed to embrace the principles of relation and exchange heralded in the *Eloge*, and is now "représentant [...] du figé, relais de rien du tout, ni culturel ni physique et surtout... non créolisant." Tony Delsham, *Gueule de journaliste* (Schœlcher [Martinique]: Editions M.G.G., 1998), 30.

⁴² Delsham signed under his original name. Something of the vitriol directed towards him is evident in Camille Chauvet's article: "Le Béké Roger de Jaham et son nègre domestique André Pétricien alias Tony Delsham ont décidé de profaner le cap 110 au Diamant," *Le Naïf* 21 May 2010, <http://www.lenaif.net/le-beke-roger-de-jaham-et-son-negre-domestique-andre-petricien-alias-tony-delsham-ont-decide-de-profaner-le-cap-110-au-diamant-par-camille-chauvet-2/> (accessed 15 September 2015).

⁴³ See for example the untitled article featured on the Tous Créoles ! website on 22 June 2011: "L'association Tous Créoles [*sic*] me semble présenter des signes correspondant au souhait d'une métamorphose: non pas mutation brusque, mais inscription dans un autre cycle de la vie." ["Tous Créoles is an organisation that appears to offer signs that correspond to a desire for metamorphosis; not a sudden change, but a gesture towards another life cycle," <http://www.touscreoles.fr/2011/06/22/jean-bernabe-analyse-tous-creoles/> (accessed 15 October 2016).

⁴⁴ Although Jaham insists that only 50 of 240 members are *békés*, this is vastly disproportionate given their demographic status. See "Plumes d'ici. Le Mag littéraire," 14 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwQ38WXcA8w> (accessed 15 September 2015).

⁴⁵ Along with a rolling non-*béké*: see Vété-Congolo, "Créolisation," 782.

⁴⁶ "An enemy who snatches your ideological tools a perversion of créolité [...] exactly like Duvalierism was a perversion of Negritude, or as Pol Pot's regime is a perversion of Marxism," Hanétha Vété-Congolo, "La Créolité aujourd'hui," <https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=V%C3%A9t%C3%A9-Congolo>

to *créolité*, while remaining “une espèce d’œcuménisme social qui ferait croire qu’il n’y a plus de conflit de classe.”⁴⁷ Chamoiseau, when asked for his view of Tous Créoles! in April 2013, does not comment directly but, like Confiant, cites Duvalier’s support for Negritude.⁴⁸ Meanwhile Jaham’s involvement in a subsequent controversy (a notorious radio interview in which he insisted that the *béké*, too, had suffered under slavery, and that an ancestor of his had been worse off than a slave, as unlike the slave, he had no market value)⁴⁹ led to the Mouvement International pour la Réparation (MIR), led by Garcin Malsa, (unsuccessfully) calling for Jaham to be tried for defending crimes against humanity and provoking racial hatred. The fall-out, covered widely in the local press, only underscored the profound divisions between this caste and the rest.

Whatever one may think of Jaham’s various interventions, it is at the very least fair to say that this charismatic, energetic and media-savvy figure, who has engaged in (often futile or even counter-productive) attempts to reach out to the non-white populations of the Antilles, is atypical of his caste. Few other *békés* have put their heads above the proverbial parapet in recent years, and when they have, as we shall see below, it has often been with disastrous results. In February 2009, a forty-four day general strike in the Antilles would illustrate in the starkest terms the absence of the “harmonisation consciente des diversités préservées” celebrated by the *Eloge*. Rather, discourses rejected as obsolete in the manifesto, discourses founded on Manichean oppositions and identitarian separatism, were to acquire a heightened currency. The strike began in Guadeloupe, and its motto, “La Gwadeloup cétan nou, cé pa ta yo” [Guadeloupe is ours, not yours], proposed an absolute distinction between

[Congolo,+%E2%80%99CLa+Cr%C3%A9olité%C3%A9+aujourd%E2%80%99hui&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws_rd=cr&ei=nwXiVZm1CfGO7Abd77n4Cg](http://congoloblog.com/2015/09/15/la-place-des-bekes-a-la-martinique-mythes-et-realites/), n.p. (accessed 15 September 2015).

⁴⁷ A kind of social ecumenism that would suggest that there is no more class war Ibid.

⁴⁸ See Olivia Sheringham, “From Creolization to Relation. An Interview with Patrick Chamoiseau,” n.p. http://www.migration.ox.ac.uk/odp/pdfs/PatrickChamoiseauInterview_F.pdf (accessed 15 September 2015).

⁴⁹ In an interview with Harry Eliézer in “L’Heure Ultramarine,” France Inter, 15 August 2011. See also <http://creoleways.com/2009/05/07/la-place-des-bekes-a-la-martinique-mythes-et-realites/> (accessed 15 September 2015).

“nous” [us] and “eux” [them]. While Yarimar Bonilla suggests that the motto, as a “complex semiotic vehicle,” depends for its power on the shifting indexal function of “us” and “them,”⁵⁰ it is almost impossible not to see *békés* as the major constituent of the “eux” identified. Organized by the Liyannaj kont pwotayson (Creole for “Anti-Exploitation League”), the strike, led by union leader Elie Domota, was a protest against the excessive cost of living in the islands, high unemployment (according to some estimates, three times higher than in France) and the continued dominance of the *béké*. Domota’s rhetoric, and notably his statement on 9 March 2009 that “Soit ils [les békés] appliqueront l’accord [to pay a 200 Euros monthly salary increase to minimum wage workers], soit ils quitteront la Guadeloupe [...]]. Nous ne laisserons pas une bande de békés rétablir l’esclavage,”⁵¹ was deemed so inflammatory that the attorney general in Guadeloupe instigated a judicial enquiry into his alleged incitement to racial hatred.

The turbulence of the period was heightened when a documentary about the caste, *Les Derniers Maîtres de la Martinique*⁵² was broadcast eight days into the strike, bringing to a head anti-*béké* sentiment in the islands. The film features interviews with a number of middle aged or elderly white men (the representatives of the caste are exclusively male)⁵³, hidden away in gated residences, steeped in economic privilege, currying political favour in Paris, and looking to that capital rather than to Fort-de-France as their political home. In the film’s most controversial scene, octogenarian Alain Huygues-Despointes observes that in mixed-

⁵⁰ Bonilla, “Guadeloupe is Ours,” 132.

⁵¹ “Either they [the békés] put the agreement into practice, or they get out of Guadeloupe [...]. We won’t stand by while a band of whites re-establish slavery.” “Journal du soir,” RFO, 5 March 2009. *Les Derniers Maîtres de la Martinique*. I wish to thank Romain Bolzinger and TAC Presse for permission to use this image.

⁵³ Bolzinger had spoken to Marie-Reine de Jaham in preparing the documentary. When I asked why she had not been included, Bolzinger replied: “Ce sont les hommes qui détiennent le pouvoir” [It’s the men who hold the power] (Interview with Romain Bolzinger, Paris, April 2016). In an open letter to Bolzinger, dated 9 February 2009, Jaham castigates him for appearing to concentrate on a tiny minority of *békés* “dans le but évident de faire de vos ‘Békés’ de vieilles crapules cyniques et racistes, passant sous silence les honnêtes gens qui œuvrent patiemment pour la justice, pour le partage et pour la paix” [with the obvious aim of showing your békés up as old, cynical and racist codgers, totally ignoring those honest people patiently working for justice, sharing and for peace.” http://www.potomitan.info/lafwans/huyghues_despointes.php (accessed 15 September 2015).

race families, “il n’y a pas d’harmonie, je ne trouve pas ça bien,” “there is no harmony, and I don’t think that’s so great” and concludes by invoking the *béké* mantra: “nous, on a voulu préserver la race” [We wanted to preserve the race]. The family “tree” which he brandishes to camera ostensibly proves that all *békés* are descended from the same ancestor, Jean Assier, and that all are therefore today related.⁵⁴

Figure 1 here

Romain Bolzinger, *Les Derniers Maîtres de la Martinique*, Canal Plus, shown in France, Guadeloupe and Martinique 30 Jan 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDHItTb-umI>

I wish to thank Romain Bolzinger and TAC Presse for permission to use this image.

A more striking contrast with the *Eloge*’s call for the annihilation of purity and the celebration of “mélanges illicites” is hard to imagine.⁵⁵ While the *créolité* manifesto privileges proliferation, diffraction and recomposition--exemplified in such metaphors as the mangrove, the kaleidoscope and the mosaic--Despointes would appear to propose the circle as a figure of identitarian concentration and self-containment. If Marie-Reine de Jaham in *La Grande Béké* could identify the extreme endogamy of the *béké* caste as problematic for its survival, but would ultimately cop out in presenting an intruder partially from within the caste itself as its salvation, we find here, twenty years later in 2009, an unquestioning celebration of this very endogamy. Despointes rejoices in the stifling incestuousness of *béké* identity within what appears to be a radically constricted gene-pool. This family tree, realized as a series of concentric circles, appears to reduce rather than to extend genetic material. The

⁵⁴ Despointes has subsequently protested that he was misrepresented by the documentary; Roger de Jaham was quick to distance himself from Despointes on the Tous Créoles! site: <http://www.touscreoles.fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/TOUS-CREOLES-COMMUNIQUE-PRESSE-DESPOINTES.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2015).

⁵⁵ “illicit blendings,” *Eloge*, 53; 114

overt obsession with purity, and the more covert undertones of the reference to the single ancestor, are typical of a strain of *béké* discourse that fetishizes an uncontaminated and pure whiteness, repelling--and, of course, repressing the desire for a (necessary)--otherness.

The Antilles have been characterized, over the last quarter century, by postmodern discourses and movements that valorise cross-cultural, relational and mobile models of identity, whether we think of *créolité*, creolization or relation. All stand in contrast to what Bongie describes a modernist, but “now historically surpassed,” version of identity “grounded in a roots-oriented logic of filiation and legitimacy.”⁵⁶ Yet this anachronistic, roots-oriented impulse, leading inexorably back to the self and to the “same,” rather than outwards to the other, undergirds to a greater or lesser extent all the expressions of *béké* identity discussed above: Despointes’s family tree, in which a single primordial ancestor is shown to have sired an entire caste; the publishing imprint founded by Marie-Reine de Jaham ostensibly to celebrate the diversity of Creole culture, and in which only her own work is published; the dubious black and white certainties of her first novel. Roger de Jaham’s *Tous Créoles!*, apparently motivated by a different political agenda, reasserts *béké* dominance in its constitution and even in its presidency. More worryingly, it appropriates the language of *créolité*, glibly glossing over the very profound inequalities of Antillean society--inequalities that derive directly from slavery--through the celebratory and conciliatory language of what Confiant calls “œcuménisme social” [social ecumenism].⁵⁷ It is this appropriative gesture that allows Confiant in 1989 to write a fairly balanced review of *La Grande Béké* (see footnote 17), but to rail furiously against the (ostensibly) more enlightened discourse of Roger de Jaham.

Space does not permit a full discussion of the ways in which Confiant’s condemnation of *Tous Créoles!* could be seen, ironically, to mirror criticisms that the *Eloge* in its day also

⁵⁶ Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles. The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literatures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 69.

⁵⁷ Vété-Congolo, “La Créolité aujourd’hui,” np.

promoted an “excessively celebratory” vision of identity, “homogenizing and eliding real differences and inequalities.”⁵⁸ Suffice it to say that when this celebratory discourse is associated with, or appropriated and instrumentalized by, the *béké*, it takes on a much more incendiary and offensive charge. In any case the three signatories to the *Eloge* appeared by 2009, the year of the strikes, to hold divergent views about the legacy of their own movement. Chamoiseau was by this stage in a period of intense collaboration with his mentor, Glissant, and was more apt to invoke the theoretical models of “relation” [relating] or “mondialité” [wordliness]. Bernabé had been a fairly vocal defender of Jaham’s project, contributing several essays to the Tous Créoles! website. (As this article went to press, however, his *La Dérive identitariste* appeared, an essay which was to revoke the underlying identity politics of both the *Eloge* and Tous Créoles!)⁵⁹ Confiant, who continues to defend the movement “à cent pour cent” [one hundred percent], all the while admitting its failure, announced in 2008 that the triumvirate were preparing a follow-up text (“Les Preuves de la créolité”),⁶⁰ but at the time of writing (October 2016) this has yet to appear, and interventions by Bernabé and Chamoiseau would seem to make its appearance highly unlikely.⁶¹ Meanwhile the most significant manifesto to emerge in the Antilles since the *Eloge* is the *Manifeste pour les “produits” de haute nécessité* [Manifesto for Products of Great Necessity],⁶² published while the 2009 strikes were ongoing, and signed by nine Antillean

⁵⁸ See for example Maeve McCusker, “‘This Creole Culture, miraculously forged’: the Contradictions of ‘créolité,’” in Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, eds., *Francophone Postcolonial Studies. A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003), 119.

⁵⁹ Jean Bernabé, *La Dérive identitariste* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2016). Bernabé pays tribute to the “volonté d’unité” represented by Tous créoles!, but warns of the ideological dangers of promoting an identity which might depend on an “unseemly metaphorical transfer” (“un transfert métaphorique indu”), p. 101.

⁶⁰ Vété-Congolo, “La Créolité aujourd’hui,” np. Confiant observes that the title “Les Preuves de la créolité”--the proof of créolité--is a pun on the word “l’épreuve”, test.

⁶¹ In a recent blog post entitled “Retrouvailles créolitaires” (5 October 2016) marking the release of Chamoiseau’s most recent work, *La Matière de L’Absence* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), Confiant acknowledges that political differences that have emerged between the three signatories of the *Eloge*, but closes with a “recent” quote from Chamoiseau defending the *Eloge* : “The *Eloge de la créolité* was a prophetic text”. <https://www.montraykreyol.org/article/retrouvailles-creolitaires>. Accessed 15 October 2016.

⁶² Ernest Breleur, Patrick Chamoiseau, Serge Domi, Gérard Delver, Edouard Glissant, Guillaume Pigéard de Gurbert, Olivier Portecop, Olivier Pulvar, Jean-Claude William, *Manifeste pour les “produits” de haute nécessité*. First published in *Le Monde* on 16 February 2009

intellectuals including Chamoiseau and Glissant. The text gave unqualified support to the strike, and was at the same time a radical call to the overseas regions to become the first post-capitalist societies. Although the signatories are careful not to single the *béké* out for blame in the two references to the caste, the manifesto appears to put paid to the more optimistic or even quixotic views of the *Eloge*. In the first reference, we are told that rising prices and the high cost of living are not “de petits diables-ziguidi qui surgissent devant nous en cruauté spontanée, ou de la seule cuisse de quelques purs békés. Ce sont les résultantes d’une dentition de système où règne le dogme du libéralisme économique.”⁶³ This fairly innocuous and well-rehearsed argument--Glissant, after all, had after made exactly the same point in *Le Discours antillais* almost thirty years previously--points the finger at the invisible forces of globalization and liberal capitalism, rather than at white neighbours, in attributing blame for the current ills of the islands. But the *Manifeste*’s second reference to the *béké* is a thornier one, introduced in a fairly cavalier fashion: “La question békée et des ghettos qui germent ici où là,” the authors state, “est une petite question qu’une responsabilité politique endogène peut régler.” They continue, “Celle de la répartition et de la protection de nos terres.”⁶⁴ By thus describing the *béké* question as a small problem, and by vaguely gesturing to an internal political system which should be able to deal with the problem of ghettos, the signatories downplay a long-entrenched sociological phenomenon of segregation and lack of mixing. Crucially, they also deflect from the manifesto’s subsequent sentence, which contains, but glosses over, a much more radical proposition: the redistribution of land. In the interval between the *Eloge* and this *Manifeste*, for Chamoiseau (and for Confiant, as conveyed in his

(http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/02/16/neuf-intellectuels-antillais-contre-les-archaismes-coloniaux_1156114_823448.html#21VbefJ3GyqSAmy.99), then in pamphlet form by Galaade in the same year.

⁶³ “tiny little evil spirits that suddenly appear before us out of nowhere, in an expression of spontaneous cruelty, nor do they emerge from the groin of pure-blood békés. They spring instead from a system in which the dogma of economic liberalism rules.”

⁶⁴ “the *béké* question, like the problem of ghettos that have sprung up here and there, are small issues that should be sorted out internally. Likewise, the question of dividing up and protecting our lands.”

objections to *Tous Créoles!*), there has been an acknowledgement that political and societal structures need to be radically transformed in the Antilles, and that this cannot be done through co-opting, but rather by confronting, the *béké*. The fact that identitarian discourses based on race have taken hold so strongly since 2009, and for example that Jaham, Despointes and Domota have all in this period been (unsuccessfully) accused of incitement to racial hatred, suggests that the *Eloge*'s celebratory rhetoric should be seen not only as premature, but as profoundly misplaced. And from this perspective, perhaps the most striking index of the *Eloge*'s failure is the fact that its most energetic proponent now would appear to be not any one of its three signatories, but the *béké* Roger de Jaham.

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